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SUBJECT: PLAN PATRIOTA PHASE 2B: STATUS REPORT

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood.
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) President Uribe relieved Joint Task Force Omega (JTF-O) Commander General Fracica, who was in charge of carrying out Plan Patriota's Phase 2B in Southeastern Colombia, because he had failed to produce concrete results against high value targets (HVTs), Uribe's top security objective. Fracica's replacement, Army Fourth Division General Rocha, has a good reputation for his leadership of the division. His genuine concern for the morale of his troops will probably contribute to greater results for JTF-O. Rocha, however, will have to address low morale, a hostile jungle environment, disease, resource shortages, and the FARC's dogged determination to stay in the area. Moreover, if the capture or killing of HVTs is going to be his measuring stick, Rocha's cautious nature could produce a tenure as frustrating as Fracica's. As the election season get underway, Rocha's mission in the short-term is to eliminate at least one HVT, but keep combat losses to a minimum. End Summary.

BACKGROUND ON GOC's PLAN PATRIOTA

¶2. (C) Plan Patriota, the GOC's military campaign to extend government control and security presence throughout the national territory, has forced illegal armed groups onto the defensive. The Plan is composed of two major phases: Phase 1, the planning and preparation for the forceful removal of armed groups; and Phase 2, which was divided into three components: 2A, 2B, and 2C. Phase 2A, which took place from June to December 2003, was the removal of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) from Bogota and Cundinamarca Department. Phase 2B, which began in February 2004 and continues today, includes Meta, Caqueta, and Guaviare Departments. This is a large part of the area that comprised the "despeje," or the area President Pastrana had conceded to the FARC. Phase 2C, which is the forceful removal of FARC from Antioquia Department, was scheduled to begin late in 2005, but has been postponed.

¶3. (C) Plan Patriota's Phase 2B initial surge in mid-2004

was an impressive feat that forced the insurgents to react and adjust to the new military presence. The military's top objectives were to capture/kill senior insurgent leaders, destroy the FARC's logistical infrastructure, and establish governmental control of the area. Although the military never captured or killed any senior FARC leaders, operations strained guerrilla logistics and drug trafficking activities in 2004, forcing insurgents out of areas they had held uncontested for years and seek new routes to replenish their stocks of war materiel. The FARC found itself unable to use bases and logistical routes that had been safe for years. Camps where leaders had found safe haven were destroyed. Still, none of the key FARC leaders were killed.

LEADERSHIP CHANGES IN JTF-OMEGA

14. (C) On November 11, Minister of Defense (MOD) Ospina announced changes and promotions within the Colombian Military (COLMIL) leadership as is customary during this time of year. Changes in the Colombian Army (COLAR) hierarchy were modest because Uribe wishes to limit significant changeover on the eve of congressional and presidential elections. The only major announcement was the replacement of Joint Task Force Omega (JTF-O) Commander General Fracica with General Rocha, who, as Commander of the Army's Fourth Division in Villavicencio, Meta Department, had a strong reputation for his leadership of the division. Our contacts in the GOC and the press say that Fracica was relieved because he had failed to produce concrete results against high value targets (HVTs), one of President Uribe's top security objectives.

JTF-OMEGA RESULTS UNDER FRACICA,S LEADERSHIP

15. (C) Fracica took control of the JTF-O in December 2004 from General Castellanos (who was promoted to Chief of Staff of the Army). Despite Fracica's more than 100 operations in the Departments of Meta, Guaviare, and Caqueta, the military was unable to capture or kill any FARC Eastern Bloc HVT. The JTF-O launched at least five operations against members of the FARC Secretariat in 2005. Despite the lack of success against HVTs, the GOC's success in reestablishing a government presence in areas it had long ago abandoned has heightened public confidence in the government and the military. The COLMIL's Plan Patriota under Uribe has dramatically altered the playing field, particularly in the JTF-Omega area. JTF-Omega's campaign in the south has damaged the rebels' logistics and transportation infrastructure and is probably reducing the drug income available for financing FARC activities, particularly in the Eastern Bloc. The increased unreliability of the FARC as a supplier of cocaine due to capture of FARC camps and infrastructure, seizure of cocaine loads, and government attacks on transportation routes has hurt the FARC.

16. (C) JTF-O reports the following results for 2004-2005:

	2004	2005	Total
	=====	=====	=====
Battles	505	317	822
COLMIL Troops Killed	67	25	92
COLMIL Troops Injured	328	78	406
FARC Members Killed	264	204	468
FARC Members Captured	217	394	611
FARC Deserters	97	76	173
Materiel Captured:			
Guns, Rifles, Support Arms	265	431	1,451
Explosive Devices	2,752	3,074	5,826
Explosives (KLS)	16,335	28,339	44,674
Grenades	4,440	5,962	10,402
Munitions	630,428	826,022	1,456,450
Communication Equipment	235	363	598
Mined Camps	206	88	294
FARC Camps	421	619	1,040

Caches	117	363	480
Cultivated Hectares	1,277	1,167	2,444
Coca Paste and Base	10,292	869	11,161
Laboratories	32	196	228
Vehicles	255	117	432

17. (C) COLMIL officers say that Fracica's temperamental nature provides chances for advancement.

ROCHA'S CHALLENGES

18. (C) Rocha is expected to be the opposite of Fracica, in that his strong people skills and genuine concern for the morale of his troops are expected to contribute to greater results for JTF-O. He oversaw the 2005 COLAR offensive operations against the FARC, known as Operation Emperor8 in the Macarena Ridge Area, which, while failing to net any HVTs, disrupted the FARC's drug producing activities. He also did well last year as second Brigadier Commander in Barranquilla. If the capture or killing of HVTs is the measuring stick, Rocha's cautious nature could produce results as frustrating as Fracica's. Observers say that his inability in the past to conduct HVT operations has been due to his unwillingness to take risks. As the election season gets underway, Rocha's mission is to try to eliminate at least one HVT but keep combat losses to a minimum.

19. (C) Rocha will have to overcome several challenges as Plan Patriota enters its third year. The logistical strain of keeping 15,500 troops in the dense, hostile jungle miles away from their supply bases is a huge endeavor. Rocha will have to address the effects of low morale, a hostile environment, disease, resource shortages, and an inability to drive the FARC out of the area. He will have to continue to delay the third phase of Plan Patriota, Phase 2C,8 scheduled to begin in Antioquia Department by the end of this year, in favor of maintaining pressure on the FARC's southern stronghold, which has moved further southwest (to the Putumayo Department and Ecuadorian border) and northeast (to Arauca Department and the Venezuelan border).

10. (C) According to information received from senior COLMIL officials in recent weeks, the following are points of concern for JTF-O success and sustainability of its operations in southern Colombia:

-- Leadership Challenges: Despite the COLMIL's significant accomplishments in recent years, senior officials say that the lack of willingness on the part of military leaders to take risks suggests that the military will continue to fall short of Uribe's goals and expectations. Some COLMIL leaders have lamented publicly that Uribe appears to be running his presidential campaign on their backs. The appointment in July 2005 of MOD Ospina has energized the security forces to conduct more frequent and aggressive operations against FARC leaders and pushed an unprecedented level of cooperation in joint operations. Nevertheless, a top tier HVT success is important in the near-term if MOD Ospina is to sustain adequate senior COLMIL support. Some generals say they were demoralized because Uribe was constantly berating them for failing to achieve high-visibility results against the FARC. Uribe fatigue within the COLMIL threatens to have detrimental consequences if he wins a second-term.

-- Scarce Resources: Military operational commanders complain that troop numbers and transportation resources were insufficient to support the overall concept of operations. The level and pace of COLMIL engagement against the FARC is not sustainable, certainly not through 2010, the end of what would be Uribe's second term. Continued gains depend on sustainability of the military offensive and the ability of the GOC to hold territory cleared of illegal armed groups. The FARC appears to be avoiding combat, and drawing from their strategic reserves to keep their principal blocs in operation. FARC units operating outside the Plan Patriota area of operations and along Colombia's borders have

continued their trafficking operations with little disruption. Moreover, the FARC has attempted to take advantage of perceived paramilitary weakness and establish a stronger presence along the Pacific coast.

-- Adjusting to Change: While FARC forces in the area had adapted to the military presence and adjusted their logistical techniques by the end of 2004 with small, coordinated attacks, JTF-O has failed to adapt to the change.

According to the Defense Attache's Office, JTF-O has continued to operate in battalions and brigades to avoid being targeted by the FARC, which further strains their limited resources. JTF-O officers have told us that "conditions are not right" for allowing smaller companies to operate more discretely and increase operations against the enemy. Nevertheless, given the nature of the guerrilla conflict, the military incurs the burden of staying proactive, mobile, and bringing the battle to the enemy, while the FARC is merely required to evade the COLMIL and survive through the campaign; hence, the insurgency's "wait out the military" strategy. According to the testimonies of recent FARC deserters, the insurgency has adjusted in three main ways: 1) the FARC has retreated to more jungle-like areas, which are harder for the military to access; 2) FARC leadership is increasing its control over the troops to prevent desertions; and 3) the FARC is increasing the control and manipulation over members' families and is successfully recruiting minors, who are easier to influence.

-- Legal Constraints: According to COLMIL legal advisers, JTF-O executes military operations against FARC insurgents in southern Colombia under civilian legal rules. Despite operating as an armed insurgency, the constitutional guarantees of captured or surrendered FARC guerrillas are the same as those of all Colombian citizens. In the legal advisors' view, the remoteness of the jungle complicates legal processing of detainees, leading to the release of many captured fighters. In 2005, over half of the nearly 400 FARC fighters captured in the JTF theater have been released by prosecutors (fiscals) for one of the following reasons: insufficient proof of FARC association; failure to press charges before a fiscal within the 36-hour constitutionally-mandated deadline; a lack of defense lawyers available at time of charges; and FARC-paid defense lawyers that find errors in the process and get detainees released on technicalities. Moreover, detainees can and often do bring a countersuit against the military for illegal detention and/or obstruction of justice. Therefore, the military battalion commander is vulnerable to years or even decades of investigations. According to the advisors, the net effect is to condition military commanders in the field not to waste time, limited assets, and careers to try to process low or middle-level fighters.

COMMENTS

110. (C) JTF-O will have to make combat operational changes to go beyond its initial successes during Plan Patriota's Phase 2A and the earlier part of 2B. The military campaign Uribe has extracted from the COLMIL is not sustainable without additional resources and reinvigorated morale.

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